

A photograph of two young women posing closely together against a plain, light-colored background. The woman on the left has long, dark brown hair and is wearing a light blue tank top. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The woman on the right has long, light brown hair and is wearing a grey tank top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The lighting is soft and even.

*Action Speaks Louder
Than Words*

by
Alessa

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

by Alessa

Kaylin Webb's moans of pain were like a symphony playing in my ears.

A melodious composition of "Whaa... Ouch!" followed by an indignant "Hey!" resounded through the air, harmonizing perfectly with her cries of protest and outrage. It was music to my ears, truly.

Before me stood a girl, clutching her face, muttering threats like, "Going. Kill. You. So. Dead."

But, in all fairness, she had it coming. You see, Kaylin Webb was an ass. Kaylin Webb also just saw me half-naked.

My immediate response? To hurl a shoe at her face.

In my defence, it wasn't entirely my fault that I possessed the throwing arm of Superman! Or was it Superwoman? Regardless, it filled me with an immense sense of satisfaction, a feeling I hadn't experienced since I poured apple juice over her head. That had only happened last week, mind you.

To put it simply, Kaylin and I weren't the best of friends. In fact, we weren't friends at all. Period.

This was precisely why I clutched the towel tightly around my chest and pointed firmly towards the door. "Get out! Get out, you pervert!"

This was the price she paid for barging into my room *just* as I was about to drop my towel and change. My Ugg boots never had a better use than slapping Kaylin across her pretty face.

She cradled the forementioned pretty face with both hands, but I could still detect the fire in her narrowed gaze. "If I were to perv, it certainly wouldn't be on you, twerp!" she retorted.

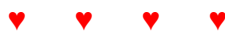
I huffed, momentarily forgetting that the only thing I was wearing consisted of a towel wrapped around my body. "Actions speak louder than words!" I replied, gesturing for her to leave. "Now, get out!"

Kaylin glared at me for a moment longer, but eventually took slow steps backward and left the room.

I slammed the door shut the moment she was out of sight.

Kaylin: 0. Danni: 1.

Score!



The problem with Kaylin was that I *had* to know her. Or, rather, correction: there were *many* problems with Kaylin. The *biggest* problem was that her Mom was my Mom's best friend.

So after a day of school where I was thinking I'd escaped her oh-so-not-wonderful presence—*bam!* She was there on my couch, grinning. And it was a familiar grin; it was the grin she gave me five years ago, right before she sneaked up behind me and cut off one of my pigtails with a pair of scissors. Ten-year-old Kaylin had no mercy back then, either. And eight-year-old me? I drew on her face the next time I slept over at her house with a permanent marker that did *not* come off easily. Hah!

Well, back to the situation at hand.

Fifteen-year-old Kaylin was no better, grinning her oh-I-am-so-going-to-get-you grin at me while she lay sprawled across *my* couch.

I would say she looked demented, but that was a blatant lie. At fifteen, puberty was *unforgivably* kind to her. The boys at school thought so too.

Humph! But I knew the truth.

Under that seemingly pretty exterior, Kaylin Webb was pure evil.

"Hello, Danni," she said, smiling, her emerald eyes fixed on me. Some might say she had eyes like the devil himself... but not me, of course.

"Hello, Kaylin." I matched her smile with one of my own, trying to work out her game.

Kaylin just continued to smile, like she knew something I didn't. Not that I wanted to know what she knew—nothing good ever came out of Kaylin's mouth. True fact.

I decided to let her know how much I appreciated her presence at my house. I drew my hands together and exclaimed, "How nice of you to drop by!"

I hoped she could sense the stinging sarcasm in my voice.

"How nice, Danni!" came my Mom's voice as she entered the lounge room. She was smiling at us both, and on top of everything, she and Kaylin had some kind of understanding I didn't know about. From the look in Kaylin's eyes and the way my Mom's hands were clasped together, it was not a good thing.

Mom did not notice my bemusement. "You two are always arguing. Isn't it nice to get along once in a while?"

Kaylin brushed her face where my boot had hit her. Weakling. "Danni and I are really close, Mrs. Miller," she said, smiling some more.

Well... If she wanted to play that game, "Spending time with Kaylin is the highlight of my day." My tone matched hers for sincerity.

Mom did not notice anything amiss. "Great. Then you two will get along fine while Kaylin stays with us, Danni!"

I was about to say something else when her statement sank in. Stays with us? Kaylin is staying with us? What is this folly!

From the slight frown on Mom's face and the grin on Kaylin's, it seemed I had voiced my last sentiment. I tried to look abashed. Except, not really.

"My parents are visiting my grandparents in England," Kaylin offered as an explanation.

I refused to take it. It was not a good reason to torture me. "And you couldn't go, too?" I asked bluntly.

She arched an eyebrow, which gave her that endearingly puzzled look. "And miss the opportunity to bask in your presence? Why would I want to do that, Danni?" She gave me a look that said everything she didn't say aloud.

And it wasn't very nice. Jerk.

Mom was smiling as if Kaylin had given me a compliment. "Kristen and I decided it'd be best if Kaylin stayed for the whole of the high school year."

Horror sunk in. Did she just say what I thought she said? My life flashed before my eyes—I was stuck under the same roof with Kaylin for the whole school year! I could just think of all the things she could do to me while I was unsuspectingly asleep. Nowhere would be safe!

"Calm down," Kaylin said, grinning at the look on my face. "It's not for an entire year. It's for two weeks."

I could breathe again! Then I realised two weeks was still two weeks, and two weeks was fourteen days. It meant we would be in the same vicinity as each other day *and* night.

Still, I suppose it was better than a year.

I pursed my lips together.

"Isn't this nice? You can help each other with homework!" My Mom either completely ignored my irritation or was unaware of it.

Kaylin had the nerve to look smug. "I guess we're roomies now."

Mom beamed before leaving. She had no idea what she was inflicting on her only daughter.

When Mom was gone, Kaylin's smile disappeared. She stretched lazily and moved her hands behind her head.

Great. She was already making herself feel at home.

Then her gaze raked over my body from head to toe, taking in my oversized T-shirt and wet blonde hair, making me feel uncomfortably self-conscious. I folded my arms over my chest in an attempt to hide it from her exploring eyes and frowned.

Kaylin grinned easily. "How was your shower?" I didn't know how anyone could make something so innocent sound so... not very nice.

"How's your face?" Ha! I was the queen of comebacks, of course.

She merely smiled and motioned lazily with one hand. "What do you think?" She waggled her eyebrows.

Hello, Miss Vain. "Are you hitting on a thirteen-year-old kid?" I snapped back. "I think you have problems. Psychological problems." Which she obviously did—the ones dealing with oversized egos and deviant sexuality.

"I think you're jelly, Pikachu," she replied calmly.

I drew my brows together. "Don't call me Pikachu!"

This conversation was going nowhere, just like everything to do with Kaylin. It's like we met for the first time again, aged six and eight. She told me I was sitting in her spot at the sandpit. I refused to move. She kicked my sand castle. I pushed her down, face first. It's been downhill for us ever since.

I pretended to consider Kaylin's statement seriously. "Oh, and I am so jealous," I agreed. "I am jealous that your boobs are this big," I opened my arms wide, exaggerating the size of her otherwise moderate boobs—and one day they will *pop!* Ka-boom! And then your boobs will be no more, and I will laugh."

I demonstrated by laughing ridiculously, a continuous, "Ha! Ha! Ha!" I'd like to mention that I was very good at it. I came with many secret—albeit pointless—talents.

Kaylin was trying to give me a you-are-so-weird look, but she couldn't stop the slight curve that was appearing at one end of her mouth.

I gave her an insincere smile and curtsied.

Then I ran upstairs to my room super fast. See, this way I could get the last word in. Yup!

Well, until dinner, but it's all about the moment.



Plan: develop Superman's speed. Then I could run down to the dinner table, grab food, and run back to my room. And no one would notice because I'd be super fast.

I sighed. Alas, I was only human.

I opened the door slowly and peeked into the corridor. No sign of Kaylin. Phew.

I took a wary step. Then another one. This might just work!

I bolted down the corridor and down the stairs as fast as I could. And while it wasn't Superman fast, it seemed fast enough to avoid Kaylin until I had the protection of my family, and then she—"Oh my god!"

Jumping down the stairs four steps at a time resulted in me crashing into someone and lying on top of the person I crashed into.

That was one of the problems with a curved staircase.

I opened one eye; I didn't realise I had them closed. Besides the initial "*Oh!*" of the impact and the whole lying on top of somebody thing, I didn't feel anything. I slowly tested each limb. Nothing. No pain. Safe!

The person groaned beneath me. She sounded like she was in pain. Oops.

"You're... so... heavy."

Great. Kaylin.

Instead of getting off her, I wanted to jump on her. And *not* in that way, okay? I wasn't going to jump her bones; just make her feel some actual weight!

But I decided to show some mercy on my... roomie. I got off her back and stepped back, in case she decided to swing at me or something. I had a mental image of Kaylin as King Kong, grabbing defenceless little me and then dropping me from a tall building.

Kaylin got up slowly, rubbing her back rather awkwardly as she glared at me.

I gave her a small wave and a cheeky smile.

It was not well received. She just frowned. "What are you trying to do? Kill me?"

"There's a thought!" I said jokingly.

She was not impressed.

Something told me I should apologise to Kaylin, but apologising to Kaylin Webb was like committing a crime against nature. It was just unnatural! Still, staring at her made me feel bad. Jumping down the stairs has never hurt anyone before. I should treat Kaylin like I'd treat anyone else.

It was just so hard.

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Kaylin."

I waited for her response.

Kaylin just sighed, one of those dragged-out, long-suffering sighs. "Look, Danni," she said calmly. "I think it'd be easier for both of us if we just got along for the next two weeks."

I blinked. Who was this girl, and what did she do to Kaylin? Was she calling for a *truce*?

Kaylin nodded. "I think you should think about it." Then she left me behind, gaping at her.

I couldn't think properly through dinner. Kaylin Webb *couldn't* change.

But she was the picture of perfect charm with my family. She had even won over my little brother completely. Robbie was looking at her like she was his heroine. My innocent little brother was turning over to the dark side! And Kaylin didn't even use triple chocolate chip cookies to do it. I was grudgingly impressed.

"Danni?"

I blinked. Everyone was looking at me. My Mom motioned to my knife and fork.

"Unless you're trying to slice through the plate," she said pointedly, "your chicken had been cut five minutes ago."

I looked down at my plate. Oh. Right.

I stuffed a piece of chicken into my mouth and waited for the conversation to go back to where it was. And it didn't take long with Kaylin there. Kaylin Webb, a teenage *femme fatale* with her pixie face, coal-black hair, and green eyes, easily had conversation flowing around her.

Beside being a pervert and a psychopath, she was now a family stealer to boot. I didn't trust her one bit. Seven years of her presence in my life taught me self-preservation.

Kaylin met my eyes for a split second and smiled. I narrowed my eyes and just chewed for the remainder of dinner, staying silent.

Kaylin was getting under my skin.

And that was my excuse for letting what happened eight hours after dinner happen.

You know what they say—a leopard never changes its spots.

I should have known.



At 3 a.m., *I'm Too Sexy* began blasting from under my bed. I was bound and gagged.

I'm so going to kill her!

That was what I was yelling beneath the gag that changed my words into muffles. I'd even locked the door too! Damn Kaylin, and however she managed to do this.

I struggled with whatever it was that tied each one of my limbs to a bed post. Except for a few centimetres, Kaylin had me effectively captured.

And *I'm Too Sexy* kept playing. It was remixed and filled with beats, and so loud I was going crazy, but not loud enough for my parents to hear it at the other end of the second-story house. Robbie slept through anything, and the guest bedroom was inhabited by dead-meat-in-four-hours.

"I'm too sexy for my car, too sexy for my car."

Argh! I kept yelling, and even though it didn't do anything, listing every way I was going to dismember Kaylin made me feel better. She was so dead. She was so dead. Saying it almost made the song bearable. Almost.

When the song finally ended, my room fell into silence. Except for the thudding of my heart in my ears, everything felt normal. I took a few deep breaths.

After I controlled my breathing, I could've almost fallen asleep.

I should've known Kaylin wasn't finished.

I'm Too Sexy started playing again at 3:30 a.m. And then 4 a.m. And then 4:30 a.m.

Every.

Damn.

Half.

Hour.

5 a.m. 5:30 a.m.

6 a.m. 6:30 a.m.!

Trying to sleep was just impossible! Every time I closed my eyes and nearly drifted off to sleep, it would start again, until the words *I'm too sexy* were beating into my head like a tattoo.

Kaylin was so damn dead!

She must've thought *I'm Too Sexy* was similar to a lullaby because I could hear the window slide open at 6:47. I don't know how many times that morning I looked at my alarm clock.

There was only one thing I knew for sure: Kaylin Webb was going to *pay*.

She must've thought I was asleep because her footsteps were barely audible.

I knew the exact moment she stood beside my bed. It was the exact moment I wanted to leap on her and tear her to pieces.

It was so hard to control my breathing so it didn't sound irregular.

After what felt like an eternity, my blanket near my feet shifted, and I could feel warm hands touching my right ankle. The urge to wriggle from the sensation was so hard to resist. The only thing that controlled me was the thought of having *my* hands around her throat.

When she finished untying the right ankle, she started on the left one. I couldn't resist the sensation this time. My freed bare foot swung at her face.

Kaylin's grunt was covered by the sound of her falling on the carpet.

Goal! If only her friends at school knew how easy it was for a 7th grader to defeat her.

Kaylin had loosened the bound on my left ankle, and I wiggled my left leg to free itself. Now both my legs were free to kick her ass. I just needed a way for my feet to free my hands and mouth.

Before I could figure that out, Kaylin had stood up, staring down at me.

My "I'm going to kill you, you jerk!" turned into more muffles.

The slight frown on Kaylin's face turned into wry amusement.

"Did you like my song choice?"

She could interpret the muffles that came as my response any way she wanted. I shook my head and tried to swing my bare legs at her again.

She was ready this time. Before my legs had even left the bed, she had them pinned down.

And it was at that moment, with her warm hands on my legs, that I realised what she was wearing. Or maybe it was what she was *not* wearing.

The jerk was wearing nothing but her sports bra and gym shorts.

Show-off!

Kaylin grinned. "Are you going to behave now, Pikachu?"

I didn't even bother trying. I just glared at her. I was shooting daggers and hoping they'd actually turn into real daggers and stab her in the heart.

And then *I'm Too Sexy* started again.

My reaction was automatic. I went crazy because of the blasted tune, my feet and arms trying to swing at something, and that something being Kaylin.

But being older and bigger than me, she had my legs firmly held down, and my wrists were tied. I couldn't even spit at her face when "*I'm too sexy for my shirt, too sexy for my shirt*" came on, and my traitorous eyes were glued to her boobs only inches from my nose.

For however long the song played, I tried to wrestle with my bounds, but it was no use. When "*And I'm too sexy for this song*" came with the end of the torture, I fell still, my breathing heavy.

Kaylin relaxed her hold. I thought I was semi-free.

Instead, she decided to climb on top of me and hold my legs down with one of her own. She was almost straddling me, one hand on one side of my chest and the other hand on the other. The nerve of that pervert!

She stared at me. Her face was inches from mine.

"You know, kid, silence suits you."

Jerk. Calling me a kid when she was only two years older than me. As I started to struggle again, she dangled a finger in front of my face.

She motioned the closeness of our proximity with the same finger, and then her eyes fell on the two little bumps on my chest.

I hoped the heat I felt on my face didn't appear as well.

Kaylin's eyes returned to mine, and it was accompanied by the smirk on her lips. "If you try to move again, it might be a bad idea"—she leaned down and narrowed the already short distance between our bodies—"because I might just have to press my body against yours, and my head just might land somewhere..." She let it trail off purposefully and watched my reaction with a slight grin.

I lay absolutely still. I tried to stop breathing, but it only made me resemble a tomato.

For a moment, Kaylin just stared at me. Her eyes were so intensely bright, and I'm ashamed to admit I found something enthralling in them.

She lifted one hand up and slowly moved it closer to my face, holding her body on top of mine with one arm. She brushed the hair on my face away gently.

"You know," she said softly, "I lied yesterday. I'd perve on you any day, Danni."

And then her lips quickly touched mine.

I stopped breathing.

What was happening?

Her eyes were fixed on mine as her hand moved to my gag. Slowly, she loosened the knot, but her gaze never left mine.

I felt like I was burning up with a fever.

The gag fell from my lips.

And that's when the door flung open.

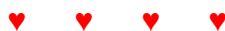
"Oh my god!"

Kaylin and I both turned our heads abruptly.

Jackie, my best friend, had one finger pointing at us in shock, the other hand holding the key to my room. I forgot that she decided to be my own alarm clock this year. It was what happened when I tried to sleep in every morning. She decided she was going to do me a favour by kicking my butt out of bed each morning.

Jackie's eyes were the size of saucers, and her mouth was hanging wide open. *"Oh my god, Danni!"* She repeated, the finger pointed at us shaking.

And this was where my Mom decided to enter the scene.



I was trying to sleep during my free period at school. This included trying to forget about everything that happened in the morning—including everything that ended with my parents sitting Kaylin and me down and giving us the *birds and the bees talk*.

Even though *nothing* happened! They didn't believe me despite my fervent insisting: "Mom, Dad, it's not what it looks like! We were only fighting. I would *never* do something like that with a girl!"

Kaylin just sat still and listened patiently, as if my parents' presumptions were all true. I have never been more embarrassed in my life, and her cute demeanour and prim politeness only grated on my nerves.

The thought of Kaylin made me want to grind my teeth. I resisted the temptation. Teeth grinding made falling asleep much harder.

I buried my head in my arms. There were thirteen days left of the two weeks. It was like Chinese water torture. I was going to go *crazy*. Even more crazy than I was right now, trying to sleep in the school library. The lack of sleep was catching up to me. But I still couldn't fall asleep.

Forget about counting sheep. I was counting the number of times my knife stabbed Kaylin in the chest.

"Boo!"

Knowing it was Jackie, I didn't even attempt to move my position. It was already sort of comfortable—as comfortable as resting against a table could be.

"Hey! Danni!" I felt something prod my arm continuously.

I moaned. "Leave me alone."

I could hear Jackie chuckle. It didn't stop her from poking me with her finger.

"You owe me a story."

"Shut up," I moaned again. "Nothing happened."

"That wasn't what it looked like." Jackie sounded like she was having too much fun at my expense.

I moved my buried arms and head a few inches away from her. "I hate you. I hate her too."

There was no outrage in her response. She *cackled*.

I moved away a few more inches.

"Danni," she said sweetly, "we both know it's not *hate* you feel for Kaylin."

I tried to drone out her voice. I refused to sacrifice potential sleep for silly schoolgirl nonsense. And it *was* nonsense she was spilling out. How dare she even suggest something like that?

Jackie poked me again.

Oh, this was impossible. I sat up and fixed my best friend with the lethal glare I usually gave Kaylin.

And, unfortunately, her reaction was the same as Kaylin's as well. She merely looked amused. But it was my lethal glare! I sighed in resignation. If only I were a basilisk, like in Harry Potter. Then maybe I could've returned to attempting sleep.

"You know what?" Jackie asked thoughtfully. "I bet I could solve all your problems."

Hah. I gave her a raised glance. "You can murder Kaylin and then feed her body to the sharks?"

Jackie waved me off. "That's not your problem."

Yes, it is. I just never found the opportunity in the past seven years. I told that to Jackie, but she continued to wave me off.

"I saw the way you two were canoodling in the morning."

"We were not canoodling!!!"

I clamped my hand over my mouth when I realised we were still in the library. I may have just said the previous comment too loud. The tables around us stared.

Jackie waved them away and pulled me closer. "Did she kiss you? Did she touch you inappropriately?"

She sounded excited. My best friend was getting excited at the prospect of Kaylin Webb touching me inappropriately! What was this lunacy? I refuse to be the object of her vile fantasies.

I stared at her in disbelief. "Do you realise what Kaylin did is illegal? Tying up innocent little schoolgirls is punishable by death!"

She gave me an innocent look, followed by a sly grin. "So can I test my theory?"

I kept the same look of loathing on my face when I asked, "What theory?"

I shouldn't have even asked. What came out of Jackie's mouth was, "That every time Kaylin looks at you, she wants to ravish your sexy body."

What was this insanity! She was out of her mind. She was delusional. Oh, forget delusions. She was beyond that. "You're nuts!"

Besides, who says ravishes? Jackie had been reading way too many romance novels. She was trying to push these weird delusions on me!

She grinned at my expression. "Don't argue, Danni. This morning confirmed it!"

I frowned. "No, it didn't. We were fighting like we do all the time because Kaylin is an idiot."

"Danni," she sighed. "You were half naked in bed, and she was kissing you!"

I rolled my eyes in frustration. "I had a T-shirt on, and I was in bed because I have to catch sleep once in a while." Is she even listening to me?

"Okay," Jackie waggled her eyebrows. "Give me your umbrella."

"What?"

"Just give me your umbrella."

I glanced out the window. It wasn't raining. I stared at Jackie doubtfully. Maybe I should recommend her to the school counsellor.

"Is it in your bag?" she asked impatiently.

I nodded reluctantly. Before I even said anything else, she ran out of the library. To get my umbrella, I guessed. Jackie was one confused girl.

Ravish me. Yeah. Right.

Jackie didn't return afterwards, so I just rested my head again. I had this mild headache and feared *I'm Too Sexy* would suddenly play.

Ravishing or not, Kaylin was going to pay for her sick prank.

Then I realised I used the adjective ravishing in conjunction with Kaylin.

Oh, *Jackie*. She and her romance novels were such a bad influence.

She is also a witch who predicted it would rain.

It started an hour later and it was literally pouring. It didn't seem to get lighter, either. The weather around here was so temperamental these days. It was humid and raining—the worst possible combination.

By the time my afternoon History Extension class ended, I found Kaylin sitting outside. If she were anyone else, I might have been touched that she was waiting for me. School finished almost an hour ago, but she stayed behind.

I raised an eyebrow, but she shrugged, getting up.

My friends gave me raised looks as they walked past us. I could see a few of them grinning at me and giving me knowing glances, as if Kaylin were my prince charming. Can't they see we're both girls, for crying out loud! I decided to ignore my traitorous friends.

"It's raining even harder now," I commented to Kaylin. Some part of me was curious about why she stayed behind. But there was another part of me that was still angry with her for what happened this morning.

She just grinned. "I was hoping you had an umbrella."

At least there was an answer. I shook my head with a frown. As I had thought, my umbrella was gone when I checked my bag. Instead, there was a message, '*Thank me later*'. I was certainly *not* going to thank Jackie later.

"Oh well," Kaylin said easily. "Ready to brave the rain?"

I stared at her. My house was a fifteen-minute walk, or ten minutes if we ran. We and everything we carried would be soaking wet by the time we reached my place.

Seeing my face, Kaylin's grin widened. "Chicken?"

My incredulous response was, "Are you nuts?"

I knew it. She was crazy. I was carrying seven periods of school material. It would not last in the pouring rain. It'd all turn into papier-mâché by the time we reached home.

Kaylin didn't understand. "You won't get sick," she said patiently. "It's so hot outside."

I waved my folder in her face. She finally understood. The jerk started laughing. I scowled.

"Here I was, thinking you were worried about your health."

I scoffed. "If you cared so much about my health, you would have let me sleep in peace this morning!"

Kaylin just grinned. "I didn't say I cared."

I ignored her and proceeded to walk to the school's gate. There was a portico that acted as the last shelter from rain between school and my house; I began contemplating my options there.

Both my parents were at work, so that ruled out a car ride. Jackie, that traitorous little toad, usually took a bus, so I couldn't get my umbrella back. And it was already four o'clock, so the school was pretty much deserted, meaning no one else could really give me a ride. The last option was to brave the rain.

The pouring rain in front of me was becoming more and more unappealing with each passing second. The weather was horrible.

Today was so not my day.

"Decided yet?"

I ignored Kaylin. She was too cheerful for the internal struggle that was happening within me.

She stood beside me and offered me a hand. I just gave her a weird look that said, *'Don't even think about it'*.

"Give me your things," she commanded, motioning towards my books and bags. Right. It wasn't like I thought she was asking to hold my hand.

I slowly took my backpack off and handed it to her with my folder. She was strangely calm.

"You're not going to throw it into the rain, right?"

From the evident amusement in her eyes, I was beginning to regret listening to her.

"My house is a lot closer," she answered.

Then she proceeded to take out all the sheets in my folder and put them in my backpack.

My mouth fell open. I grabbed her hand in reaction.

Kaylin's eyes looked at our hands, then at me. She raised an eyebrow. "Would you rather your sheets get wet?"

I let go of her abruptly. I couldn't say anything. I just watched her methodically move the papers into my bag. Then she gave me my empty plastic folder back. I just stared at it blankly.

Kaylin took my hands and placed the folder in them. Then she moved it until it was above my head. "Some form of umbrella, right?" She smiled, and her smile left me with a strange sensation in my chest.

I kind of just stood there, shocked, when she took my bag with her and ran out into the rain. She was a couple of metres ahead before I realised what she intended to do.

"I bet you can't catch me!" she yelled, the rain instantly drenching her school uniform.

She brought up the terrible habit of making me play catch when we were younger. I almost laughed.

"Just wait!" I called back.

Kaylin grinned and started running, shooting a glance over her shoulder. "Still too fast for you?"

It was one battle Kaylin could never win. I've always been the fastest runner in my class.

I took first steps into the rain with the folder covering my head. The rain bounced off the surface and slid down my hands. Folder or no folder, I was going to get wet.

And it felt strangely good.

"Watch out, Kaylin!" I chased after her.

Kaylin laughed when I brought the folder down. "You ready, Miss Slowpants?" Before I even replied, she started running again.

"You call this running?" I yelled, slowly catching up with her. "Gotcha!"

She did a quick turn, so she was facing me for a split second. She raised her eyebrows, an infectious grin spreading on her wet face. "It's only because I let you, Pikachu," she smiled and took my hand in hers.

Then she started speeding up, with me in tow.

I laughed.



I hadn't been to Kaylin's house for a while. After our Moms gave up trying to make us friends—they realised this after what you can imagine as the result of a toothpaste war—the time we spent at each other's house was the bare minimum.

Kaylin tossed me a towel to dry my hair. "You get to choose. You can wear something of mine or my Mom's."

I began drying my hair. "Whatever fits is fine."

Kaylin grinned. "Just checking."

The first problem was that Kaylin's Mom was much taller than me or Kaylin. It was kind of amazing when she stood next to Kaylin. The second problem was that her Mom was stylish. I'd feel bad if I were to wear her clothes without permission, even though I knew she wouldn't mind. Anything casual enough, she probably took with her to England. And it wasn't as if I'd never worn Kaylin's clothes before. Just not in many, many years.

"Something clean!" I called after her when she entered her room. She laughed.

I followed her in—to make sure, of course.

"So," she said cheerfully when she heard my footsteps, "any style in particular? Morning-after girl?"

Oh, she was so hilarious. I nudged her gently aside. And not because I wanted to put my hand on her and feel her warm skin beneath her wet shirt. I swear. "I'll find something myself."

I pulled open the first drawer. I closed it immediately.

"You don't need to wear my underwear to be my morning-after girl," Kaylin said with a laugh. She fell onto her bed and stretched lazily. "Take your pick of my empire, Pikachu."

I turned my back to her and continued my search. And then, from the sound of it, Kaylin started taking off her wet clothes. Jerk. She couldn't wait to start stripping until I had left the room. I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of making fun of me; I was *not* going to look. Nope, not me.

I looked.

Okay, so it appears Kaylin's perversion is infectious, but it wasn't the long, drooling look that she often gives me in my most vulnerable moments.

I peeked in her direction for a split second, enough to catch the sight of her bare shoulders, and then I pretended to ignore her. After a couple of minutes of searching, I grabbed a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and headed to the bathroom. I closed the door of Kaylin's bedroom behind me, but I could hear her laugh.

Jerk caught me looking.

I shook my head. Kaylin was so confusing, and now she was making me confused too.

When I returned, I found her sprawled across her bed and asleep. Knowing her, she probably didn't sleep this morning either. She was probably listening to me trying to get free and laughing every time the song started playing.

For a moment I contemplated lying next to her. There was just enough space on her bed to snuggle beside her, and the soothing smell of her wet hair made it even more tempting. But then I remembered her laughter when she caught me looking at her, and suddenly all the funny feelings in my stomach disappeared, as if I had been awakened from a daydream.

I closed her door again. The lack of sleep and running in the rain made my head light and my body heavy. Sleep was definitely a good idea, even if I had to sleep alone.

I headed to the guest bedroom and crumpled on the bed.

I fell asleep instantly.



Jackie literally jumped on me first thing in the morning. I woke up to her shaking my shoulders and asking, "What happened!? What happened!?"

I tried to roll over, but she was too persistent.

What she did next made me jump up instantly. *She sniffed me!*

"Jackie!" I nearly yelled. "What are you doing?"

She just looked thoughtful. "You smell normal. But there is something different."

Okay. I was so reporting her to the school counsellor, first thing at school. The girl was nuts.

Then her eyes took in what I was wearing—Kaylin's clothes. Jackie just *smiled*. I could see what was going through her head, and it was *not* something little thirteen-year-old girls should have to witness.

"Stop!" I waved a hand in front of her face. "What you're thinking did *not* happen, okay?"

"What am I thinking?" Jackie jumped off my bed and did a little dance next to me. She looked positively beaming. "I was right! I was right! I am a genius! Cupid has nothing on me!"

Kaylin and Jackie—oh, why was I constantly surrounded by insane people? I didn't know what I had done to have to bear such cruelty.

"All you did was steal my umbrella and get my sheets nearly soaked," I explained to her tiredly.

Jackie climbed back on my bed and gave me a pointed look. "I am looking at you, and something happened, Miss Denial."

I frowned. "Listen to me, you.. you... ARGH! It was raining so hard yesterday, and because *somebody* stole my umbrella, Kaylin and I ran to her house. I changed into her clothes and fell asleep. When I woke up, I was here. Home." I folded my arms together. "As you can see, nothing happened and will *not* happen because I'm simply not interested in girls, let alone girls like Kaylin."

Jackie leaned in again, and I thought she was going to sniff me, but she didn't. She just looked me closely in the eyes.

"You're lying, Danni."

She was making me frustrated with her interrogation. "I'm not lying!" It came out nearly like a shout.

Jackie didn't even blink. "You're raising your voice."

"I am not!" But I did it again.

"You like her," Jackie grinned. "And something happened"—she raised a finger to stop what I wanted to say—and even though it might not have been what I wanted, *something* happened."

I pursed my lips. "This conversation is pointless. You won't believe anything I say."

Jackie just raised an eyebrow. "How can I? Not when you don't even believe yourself. Do I have to spell it out? You are in love with a girl, and it's perfectly all right. I'll still be your best friend!"

I refused to answer her anymore. She was just spilling nonsense.

Jackie just looked at me, and there was something like pity in her eyes, and it was grating my nerves. There was nothing I needed to be pitied for.

I folded my arms. "I'd like to get changed now, if you don't mind."



The walk to school was quiet. It was just Jackie and me, since Kaylin had basketball training before school and left before I'd even woken up.

Neither Jackie nor I initiated the conversation. It wasn't that I was mad at her; I just didn't know what to say to her after telling her to leave my room. I didn't mean to get snappy. It was just that every time she talked to me about Kaylin, I got strangely defensive, and it confused me. I've never felt like this before.

In the silence, the walk to school felt longer than usual. The grass was wet from yesterday, and just thinking about the rain made me think of Kaylin holding my hand as we ran and laughed all the way to her home. I shook my head. What was happening to me? This wasn't right. I was being ridiculous.

Jackie cleared her throat. I glanced at her.

"Can I ask you a question?"

For a moment, I didn't say anything. Then I nodded. I had some idea of what she wanted to ask.

I waited for her question, but she didn't ask it right away. She looked kind of dreamy and so Jackie-like, it made me so frustrated that I wanted to laugh. Silly girl. It usually wasn't me who was the source of her amusement.

She bumped me cheerfully while we walked, swinging her folder back and forth. "You know, your reactions to her make me so confused."

She didn't have to clarify who she meant by 'her'.

"Sometimes I see you so mad you literally shake, and it's scary being near you because it's like you're about to explode. But sometimes when I see you arguing with her, your face kind of lights up, and I think you like arguing with her." Jackie smiled at the protest showing on my face. "Okay, maybe not all the time."

"Definitely not all the time," I corrected, but I waited for her to continue.

She gave me a knowing look. "And when she makes you laugh, you just seem so... *different*." Jackie lifted a hand when I wanted to interrupt. "No interruptions until I'm done."

I bumped her back.

"And when Kaylin makes you laugh, it just feels unbelievably awkward when I'm there. You look so happy and *radiant* and no one comes close to how pretty you are at that moment, and it's like Kaylin knows this, and Kaylin can't keep her eyes off you."

Every word out of Jackie's mouth sounded strange, like it wasn't me she was talking about but some other girl named Danni. She looked for my reaction, but there wasn't a reaction, not really. It was mostly confusion, and confusion and a jumble of feelings around my chest were always present when the topic was Kaylin Webb.

"So," Jackie said slowly, "can I say more?"

She looked at me for a reaction, but I had stopped, and Jackie stopped, and Jackie saw what I saw. Her eyes flew to my face, and she grabbed my hand.

"Danni!" She was pulling me back from the school's gate, but the picture was burned into my head.

There was the school oval, and there was Kaylin—Kaylin with her arms around some boy, and he was swinging her around and laughing, and she was laughing with him, and something about the scene made me feel heavy, like I was sinking into the mud and I couldn't get out, and it was just so cold.

"Danni!" Jackie was trying to pull me along, but I stopped her. I took a deep breath. I just needed to clear my head.

I didn't need to be consoled. Kaylin Webb didn't mean a thing to me. Right?

I shrugged Jackie off and continued walking in silence.

I walked past her, but Kaylin didn't even notice.



The day passed quickly, and so did the next day and the day after.

Jackie tried to talk to me in the mornings before school, during study periods, and between classes. She wanted to talk about things that weren't there, and I couldn't make her understand that there was

nothing to talk about. She was Kaylin Webb with her own friends, and I was Danni Miller with Jackie and the friends I shared classes with. I tried to let her realise that everything was back to normal, but it wasn't completely true.

I didn't talk to Kaylin, but it wasn't like I was purposely avoiding her. She tried talking to me on the way back and to school, between classes, at home. The conversation always fell flat. There was just nothing in them.

"You're losing her," Jackie said to me irritably in English class. We were supposed to be working in pairs on Frankenstein, but Jackie decided to change the topic from scientific advancements to Kaylin Webb.

I murmured some form of dissent, but it fell flat.

"Danni!" She looked aghast.

I sighed. "Look, Jackie, I've never been in love with another girl in my life, and besides, Kaylin and I never got along. Why are you acting like this?"

"Because!" She looked so frustrated. "Stop acting like a... rock!"

I twirled my pen absently. "A rock?"

"Yes!" Jackie took the pen from my hands. "You're being stubborn and cold and... That's another thing Kaylin does to you! She makes you so sad I want to kill her, but then I want to kill you because you refuse to acknowledge how sad she makes you!"

"I'm not sad," I said softly. "I'm just tired. I woke up early."

"You're sad, Danni," she sighed.

My lips quirked. She should listen to how ridiculous she sounded. "You don't know Kaylin as well as I do, Jackie."

"Oh yeah?" Jackie deadpanned. "Like what?"

I sighed. "I know she used to push me and trip me over in elementary school. I know I spent an hour making a Valentine's Day card for my crush in 3rd grade, and Kaylin ripped it up. I know she 'accidentally' spilled tomato sauce on my white dress right before my first date." My fingers absently drew circles. Remembering Kaylin's antics was tiring.

Jackie looked at me funny. She didn't say anything.

"Do you see now?" I murmured.

Jackie grabbed my face and made me look her in the eyes. "No, *you* don't see," she released me. "Do you know what I see? What I know? I know how often she smiles when she's around you. I know that she sends you chocolates every year on Valentine's Day. I know that she cares about you in ways that no boy on this planet will ever compare. And I know you're being an *idiot*."

And there was the heavy feeling in my chest again, brought back with every word Jackie said.

She didn't say anything for the rest of the period, and neither did I. The silence filled the gaps and carried every word I'd tried to forget.

The day dragged on.

It worsened when I got home.

Warm fingers wrapped around my eyes when I was going up the stairs. There was only one person it could be.

"Guess who?" she said.

I just stood there for a moment, feeling calmness spread through me at the touch of her soft fingers. The house was so quiet that I could hear our breathing. I moved my hands to touch hers, and for a moment, I just left them there. I wanted nothing else but to feel her soft skin under my fingers.

"Hello, Kaylin," I said, gently peeling her hands off my eyes.

She raised an eyebrow at me when I turned around to face her. "*Hello, Kaylin*," she imitated. "What's up with you the past few days, Pikachu?"

If I was prone to twitching, this would be one of those moments. I decided not to take the bait. "Nothing," I said coolly, starting to make my way up the stairs again.

I made it up about seven steps when she called out, "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?" I didn't turn around. I continued walking up.

She sighed mockingly. "Hurting my feelings."

I ignored her. I did not need to deal with her theatrics.

She must have run up the steps because she was right behind me in a split second. Then she picked me up like a feather. She just scooped me up like I was a toy and swung me over her shoulders.

Argh. The nerve of that girl. "Let go of me!"

Kaylin chose to feign exhaustion instead: "You're... so... heavy."

"This is dangerous!" I punched her on the back. "Let go of me now!"

"Then you might want to stay still, unless you want both of us tumbling down the stairs."

I stopped struggling, and Kaylin laughed, and the sound sent a chill down my spine. I closed my eyes, but I still saw it, and there was Kaylin laughing and that boy laughing with her, and their hands were on each other as I passed beside them unnoticed.

It left me feeling cold all over.

And there was every moment she made me feel inferior, and all the times she laughed at me. And there was every time she played with me and left me with something like a pat on the head as if I were her

puppy, and off she went to her next conquest. Jackie's words didn't change all the memories built over the years, stacked on top of each other and relentlessly tugging at my heart. It didn't change all the times she made me want to cry for hours, alone in my bedroom, and every time I forced myself to resist her pranks.

Kaylin dropped me to the ground when she reached the second floor. She was grinning. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I stared at her, but I didn't quite see her. I think there was some water in my eyes. "Why did you do that?" I needed her to tell me a reason.

Her grin wavered slightly. "What's the matter, Pikachu?"

It wasn't a reason. "Don't do that again," I said evenly. "I'm not a child. I don't need to be carried."

"Danni-"

"Don't do it again," I repeated, and there was something unreadable in Kaylin's eyes. I looked at her calmly. "You need to know something."

She leaned against the wall and folded her arms.

"Do I? After ignoring me the past few days? You just decided now?" Her tone was cool.

I was shaking. My hands were trembling beside me. I fisted them up, hoping she wouldn't notice.

"Well?" She raised an eyebrow at me. I hated how cold it seemed.

"You need to know," I tried again, hoping it would be steady this time, "that I won't be just any girl in your life. I can't. I won't." My voice betrayed me on the last words, cracking slightly.

Something in her eyes softened. "Danni-"

I shook my head abruptly. I wanted to lay down my cards. "I am who I am, and you are who you are. I don't think we can continue to be... what we are to each other. I don't think I can take it any longer."

Kaylin stood up and took a step closer to me. She picked up one of my hands and held it gently, playing with my fingers. She knew I was shaking. I couldn't stop it.

"So what are we to each other?" she asked softly.

Neither of us were looking at each other. She was looking at my fingers, and I could only look down at the floor. The feeling inside me spread, and it was heavy, and hurting, and bitter. I was doing my best to keep my eyes from tearing up. I wanted to disappear.

"Danni..."

She released my hand, and it instantly missed the warmth of her touch. I closed my eyes for a moment. Then I looked up at her. The ends of her lips were slightly curved.

"I love you, Danni," she said softly. The admission was strangely vulnerable and seemed so out of place with someone like Kaylin. She looked at me. "What do you want from me?"

I closed my eyes. I couldn't say anything when she looked at me like that. I couldn't say what needed to be said. I couldn't say what would make her hate me. But I had to say it. I had to.

My hands started shaking again. It stopped when Kaylin held one of them. I held them together and looked her in the eye just as the first tears finally spilled out of mine.

"I want you to leave."



I stayed in my room for the rest of the day. I could hear my parents talking to each other when they both came home. Mom knocked on my door, but I didn't answer. My Dad tried too, but I couldn't seem to physically get up. They left me alone after that.

I lay against the wall beside my bed. My fingers inched towards the phone, but it always fell short, and then I'd go back to lying against the wall with my eyes closed, waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened. It just remained silent, the night slowly creeping on me with the increasing darkness.

When the phone rang, I picked it up reluctantly. I didn't check the caller ID.

"Hi, Danni." Jackie's voice was soft, like she knew what happened.

"Did my Mom call you?" It came out like a whisper in the dark.

"Yeah."

We didn't say anything for a few minutes, but it felt nice, like she was leaving me space and was waiting for me to tell her what happened. Or maybe it wasn't for her sake, and she was just waiting for me to be ready. I closed my eyes and just took deep breaths to steady myself.

"I feel sad," I finally said. It still came out like a tremor.

"I know." Jackie was being so gentle that it made my eyes tear up.

"I think I did something wrong." I couldn't stop myself from shaking. It was happening again. "I thought it would stop making me sad, but it didn't."

I wanted to continue, but my throat felt dry.

"Why are you sad, Danni?" Jackie asked slowly.

"I... Kaylin," my voice cracked on her name. "She'll make me happy one moment... and then she'll make me sadder than I've ever been the next."

I buried my head in my pillows. What was happening to me? The words were hard to say because I had never felt this way about another girl before. Jackie's breathing was even, and I knew what expression would be on her face at the moment.

"And then... all I can think of is every moment where she made me feel like that, and I'm just so tired of being sad like that. And then it just doesn't seem... worth it. Why won't it work out, Jackie?" My voice was shaky. I couldn't even say her name without wobbling. "Why is it that I can remember every time she made me want to cry, even though I don't want to? What I did was supposed to make it... supposed to make it..." I couldn't say it.

Easier. Distancing myself from her was supposed to make it easier.

I took a deep breath.

Jackie's response was gentle. "I think you should talk to her. I think... you have questions I can't answer."

All I could see was the glazed look in her eyes when I told her to leave. But she didn't say anything. She just nodded.

"I don't think she'll want to talk to me," I told Jackie quietly. Not after I turned my back to her and walked away.

Jackie was quiet for a moment. And then she said, "I think she will."

Neither of us said anything for the next few minutes, and when my conversation ended with Jackie, I got up. Jackie was right. I needed to talk to her and figure out... what she meant to me... and what I meant to her. Because I couldn't understand Kaylin Webb. She made me frustrated and made me laugh. She made me sad and made me lightheaded. She made me feel so many things at once, and whatever it was that made me push her away the past few days was clawing at my heart.

I opened the door of my room, and the light that suddenly entered was disconcerting. My steps felt heavy as I made my way to the guest bedroom.

But it was empty. The door was open, but there was no one there, and everything that meant Kaylin was here was gone as if she were never here at all. It left me slightly panicked, and when I heard footsteps behind me, I turned around abruptly. It was my Mom.

Mom looked worried as she came towards me. "Danni—" she said, wrapping her arms around me.

"I think I made a mistake," I said quietly. Mom touched my face; it was wet. But I never cried.

Mom didn't say anything. She just wiped the tears with her fingers in that slow, maternal way I was used to. I relaxed in her embrace.

"Where is Kaylin?" I asked, glancing at the guest room.

"She went home," Mom explained. "She was gone before we got home."

"Mom... I—I—" My voice felt dry. "Mom, I think... I love her."

"I know, baby." She soothed my hair and smiled at me with that assuring smile that made everything feel better. "It's not too late to make things right again."

"So... you're not mad at me?" I sniffled and caught her smiling at me.

"No, Danni. We are proud of you for having the courage to say it."

Mom's words only made me hug her closer. "I think... I want to talk to her." I blushed when I realised Dad was there too, and he was twirling his car keys around a finger.

"I'm not required to join in, right?" he said jokingly, but he was looking at me with concern.

I laughed, and the tears in my eyes blurred my vision. Mom wiped them again and scooped me into her arms.

"I guess this is a family thing then," Dad wrapped his arms around us. "I just hope you won't ask me to do flower arrangements for your wedding day."

I had the biggest urge to laugh. After so many years of having urges to kill Kaylin, here was my family, making it seem like I was destined all my life to be her girlfriend.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mom said, nudging my Dad. "All we're going to do is drive Danni to her house. They will talk, and then everything will be back to normal."

"But I gave them the *birds and the bees talk*. It's not supposed to go back to normal. She's supposed to run far away."

Dad gave us the talk for his own amusement. I was tempted to hit him on the arm for putting me through so much embarrassment, but I didn't want to ruin the moment. I gave him an annoyed look, which cracked a smile from him.

He twirled the keys again. "You ready to face her?"

I blushed again, then realised there was one problem. "I... I don't think she'll let me in."

Dad just shrugged and gave Mom a look. "Don't worry, we have keys to her house."

I blinked. To say my family was surprising me tonight was an understatement.

Mom took the handkerchief from my hands. "Everything will be fine, honey. Kristen and I had a talk already. You may be surprised, but it is pretty obvious to everyone how you two feel about each other," she kissed my forehead. "Take this chance, Danni. Actions speak louder than words, right?"

I nodded. She squeezed my hands, and it made everything feel better.

I hopped in the car after wetting my face, hoping it wasn't so obvious I had been crying. The car ride consisted of Dad humming along to the radio, with me trying to run through all the things I wanted to say.

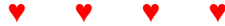
Arriving at Kaylin's house took about three minutes. Dad pulled along the road.

He gave me a look when he turned off the engine and faced me. "I'd like you to know I trust you, and even though I'll deny it later, I also trust Kaylin. The only reason I didn't spank her that morning was because I know she's a good kid," he gave me a pointed look.

I nodded. I got out of the car, and Dad drove home, making me promise to call him when I was finished.

I looked at the house in front of me.

There was only one room with the lights still on.



My heart was beating like crazy, a mixture of anticipation and fear. When I turned the keys in, I was half expecting Kaylin to demand what I was doing there, but the room was dark, and I was relying on memory to find my way to her room.

I felt like a thief, trying not to make any noise, but I didn't want her to call the police before she saw me. When I reached the top of the stairs, I could see light from her bedroom. Her door wasn't closed, and she was stretched across her bed, an arm across her eyes.

I was suddenly gripped by how ridiculous the whole thing was. I technically just broke into her house after telling her to leave me alone a few hours earlier. All I had with me for an excuse were her shirt and shorts, which Mom had washed. I was returning her clothes at eleven in the evening.

I stood there watching her, paralysed. I didn't know whether to knock or just enter, or just *leave* and call Dad to pick me up. I was scared like never before in my life. I didn't know how long I just stood there before I took a step forward. Each step felt heavy, and the closer I was, the more afraid I felt. And then I reached her doorway, and I was just standing there, but she hadn't noticed my presence. Her breathing was even, and I realised she could've been asleep. But Kaylin shifted her arm, and her eyes were open and staring at the ceiling. I felt like an intruder, a thief invading her life.

My fingers rapped the door gently. The effect was instantaneous. Kaylin flew up from her position and stared at me, her face turning from alarm to... nothing. Her eyes were on me, and I could see dried tears in them, but they showed no emotion. The way she was staring at me made something hurt inside, and it made me want to run away, made me want to be curled up somewhere far away. But I couldn't. It was my decision to face her, and it could be the only chance I had left.

"How did you get in here?" Kaylin's tone was cold.

I held up the set of keys Dad had handed me. She showed no reaction. I recognised what this was. It was how I treated her the past few days; the roles were reversed.

"Can I come in?" I asked, afraid of what her answer might be.

She raised an eyebrow for a split moment, but then it was gone, wiped away. "It's little too late for permissions, don't you think?"

I expected this reaction, but it didn't lessen the blow. I took a few steps into her room, standing there awkwardly in the centre. Her bedroom wasn't the most convenient place to talk; it was her den, and I was only a visitor.

Kaylin just watched me from her bed warily. "What are you doing here?"

I tossed the bag that contained her clothes at her. I waited for her to look inside, but she never took her gaze off me.

"It's the shirt and shorts... I borrowed." It came out awkwardly, expanding the tension between us.

Kaylin nodded in response.

My prepared answers stopped here. I didn't know what else to say to her. I'm sorry? Can we talk? Can we go back to the way it was? I ran each situation quickly through my head. None of them were well received. I placed a hand on my chest to steady myself. I could feel the beating of my heartbeat, feel the source of my fear, and everything that made me hate myself. I was a coward, giving into temptation.

This was the end of me and Kaylin.

"Good night," I said softly. And then I turned to leave. I walked out of her room. And the part of me I hated the most was the part of me that was waiting for her to stop me. I became the type of person I hated the most. That part prayed for the easy route, but Kaylin didn't stop me, and my feet continued to take me away from the light of her room.

And I reached the darkness of the stairs when I remembered. I remembered Jackie on the phone and her patience and constant presence. I remembered my parents and their laughter. I was loved and being ridiculous and needed to *take the chance*.

Actions speak louder than words.

I turned back and ran up the stairs, flew into Kaylin's room, and dropped everything in my hands.

Before she could register her surprise, I was on her bed, and I grabbed her shirt and pulled her close, and my lips were on hers, and she tasted like surprise and *Kaylin*, and then her tongue was between my lips, and my hands were grabbing her hair, and I could feel her fingers skimming my exposed back. I couldn't think, *just feel*, and Kaylin was warm and around me, and her every touch left me feeling light all over.

I don't know who pulled away first, but when my eyes opened, she was holding herself on top of me. She was catching her breath but watching me all the same. There was a faint smile on her face. I lifted a hand and touched her jaw. Kaylin took it and brought it gently to her lips.

She left me lightheaded, and it was hard to get my head clear again. I took my hand from her lips and moved her head closer to mine until our foreheads were touching.

"I... I love you, too," I whispered, and I saw her smiling before her lips touched mine again.

The kiss was softer, slower, her finger lifting my chin. It was sweet and disorienting, and I had to let it stop before I forgot everything I needed to say to her. I held her face and pulled away. She looked down at me with a puzzled look in her eyes.

I rolled her over so she was on her back, and I was straddling her. I needed her to stay still and listen.

I rested my weight against her warm body. Kaylin's arms automatically circled my waist. She tried to kiss me again, but I shook my head.

"We need to talk."

Kaylin's response was to relax and laugh, "Thirteen-year-old girls are the worst."

I punched her in the shoulder. "You were thirteen two years ago." I pushed my hair out of my face. "That makes you experienced at being the worst."

Kaylin's response was to laugh more. I shouldn't have said it; I wanted her to be serious. I covered her mouth with my hand.

"I need you to promise to listen to me without interrupting." I removed my hand when she nodded.

The heaviness inside me appeared briefly when I contemplated how to begin, but Kaylin's arms tightened around me, and it left me feeling fluttery instead. Her body was warm beneath mine, and it gave me all the confidence I needed.

I met her eyes. "I can't think straight when it comes to you. One moment you make me so happy, I feel as if I could live in the moment forever. Like now," I added softly. Kaylin smiled, and she was so beautiful, it was ridiculous. "But then..." my voice cracked. It was hard looking at her. She wanted to say something, but I'd made her promise. I took a deep breath to steady myself. "But then the next time you make me sad, it makes me feel like I can't be that happy with you without balancing it with something that makes me so sad I want to cry... a—and I—I don't cry—"

I couldn't continue. My eyes were watery, and Kaylin's embrace was so tight I couldn't breathe. She was struggling to contain everything she wanted to say to me. I had to catch my breath for a moment when her hold loosened.

"And I don't cry." I could have laughed at how shaky I sounded, how I had to blink back my tears. "You make me feel too jealous, too possessive, too emotional, too over the top with everything. And when I am in one of those moments... I remember every moment I want to forget, and it overwhelms everything I want to remember."

The expression on Kaylin's face was unfathomable.

"I saw you at basketball practise the other day. You were with that boy." I couldn't look at her. "You—"

"He was—" she cut me off, trying to sit up, but I didn't let her finish. The sound she made beneath my hand was frustration and something else I couldn't identify.

"You promised, Kaylin," I said quietly, and she forced herself to relax. "You promised you'd let me finish."

She couldn't hide the frustration on her face.

"I... I was mad. And then I told myself I didn't care, and I reminded myself of every boy you've been with over the years. And then I remembered running after you in the rain and how ridiculously light I felt even though I was drenched wet. And it's like... seeing you with him made me realise that no matter what I feel about you one moment, it'll change in the next, and I'll be sad once again, and I hate feeling like that."

It was hard to look at her. I felt Kaylin's hands cupping my face and pulling me close.

I opened my eyes again, but it was still so hard. "And I don't know if I can be what I want to be with you because it makes me scared. I don't think I'll be able to recover if you change your mind one day, or if you find someone you like better," my voice was shaking again. "So, Kaylin, what are we to each other? What do you want from me?"

Kaylin didn't say anything for a moment. She just stared at me, and not being able to read what she was thinking made me nervous, and there was that brief heaviness inside me. Then Kaylin rolled me over until we were on our sides facing each other, and she was staring at me with so much intensity it was hard to look at her burning green eyes.

"Danni..." she whispered after a pause. "You are adorable, beautiful, and smart, but you're a little fool," her eyes flashed. "What do I want from you? I want you to stop driving me crazy with everything you do. I want you to know no other girl or boy has ever compared to you, and I've been trying for years to get over how helpless you make me feel, but *nothing* has worked so far. I want you to realise how damn crazy you make me, and I will never, *never* let you go."

I was finding it incredibly hard to breathe steadily. Kaylin leaned down and touched my forehead with hers.

"I want to be there every time I make you angry, or sad, or frustrated, and I will let you kill me if that would make you feel better because I want to promise you everything I can possibly give you." She smiled, and I smiled, and it was ridiculous why I had an urge to cry. "I promised you a kingdom, but all I have to give is my heart, and even though I think you deserve more, I want you to know it's been only yours for years already."

I wanted to laugh, but laughing turned out like a choke, and my eyes were watery. I felt like a wreck.

"Only you can crush me and then kiss me and make me constantly mad. What do I want from you? I want to hold you and stay in this moment forever. I want you to be mine, and I think what I've been trying to say for the past few minutes is that I want you to be my girlfriend, and I don't know if I am giving you a choice."

I didn't know what to say back. I couldn't think of a response. I did the only thing I could think of. I pulled her down on top of me, and her weight carried the warmth that made me want to melt. My lips brushed hers teasingly.

"Actions speak louder than words?" she whispered.

Kaylin was smiling, and I was smiling, and I nodded, and Kaylin's mouth came crashing down onto mine, and it was a thousand times louder than any words.



Sometime in the morning, I woke up with Kaylin still asleep beside me. The sunlight broke through the window, and I felt lazy, and calm, and giddy, and everything at once that made me want to burst with happiness.

I couldn't stop the grin on my face, and there was only one thought on my mind. The girl I loved was beside me, and we were together and will be together forever.

It was nice watching her wake up. She opened her eyes slowly and smiled lazily at me.

"Morning, Danni."

"Good morning, Kaylin." I felt warmth spreading inside me and also anticipation. I climbed on top of her and straddled her, kissing her slowly while holding her face in my hands.

And, at that moment, in my heart, I knew this was the beginning of happiness.

The End